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Could An Affirmative Action Reversal Start A Golden Age For Historically Black Colleges?

Columbia University president and great American legal scholar Lee C. Bollinger recently published in the LA Times an editorial on the moral obligation for the Supreme Court to uphold affirmative action in admissions processes at public universities. At stake, diversity requirements at many of America's state flagship institutions of higher education, which consider race, along with socioeconomic and gender factors as key elements in manufacturing diversity on college campuses.

With new discussion on a possible reversal of affirmative action in the admissions process, there's a very real possibility that historically black colleges and universities could greatly benefit from its demise. And while no HBCU president or chancellor worth their salt in political savvy would admit it, many HBCUs can't wait to welcome back some of the best and brightest of Black America has to offer.

Many predominantly white institutions have no problems admitting high-achieving black students to meet their race-based quotas for creating diversity, but these schools struggle mightily with disparities in cultural appreciation, social hazing and intimidation through racism, and retention of minority faculty members to make the value of quota-filling worth while for students of color. Bollinger's eloquent points about the values of affirmative action aside, it is very much an incomplete theory that has yet to reach its intended aims.

And should affirmative action go away, the need for PWI pretenses in admitting respectable numbers of African-American students is all but out of the picture.

There will still be a place for elite students of all races to opt for Ivy league or state flagship education, particularly in graduate education. But there's a renewed hope that segregation 2.0 will at least force a renewal of students' social and cultural interest in HBCUs, and force students to investigate these schools beyond the enhanced stereotypes and structural realities that plague these schools' ability to attract and selectively enroll students of all races and achievement levels.

Hampton University, a private HBCU which has purposefully limited its enrollment to 5,300 students in order to admit students with higher SAT scores, make student services and outreach more robust, and

to graduate better prepared students for the globalized workforce, is an example of how public HBCUs can accelerate their growth within a re-imagined context of Jim Crow admissions policies.

A new influx of students would automatically create financial gains for HBCUs by way of tuition revenues, and could revitalize the ability for these schools to hire more faculty and staff to accommodate the growth. Public HBCUs would be better positioned to lobby state governments for additional funding to meet the new need, and the usual rebuff from legislators bemoaning retention and graduation rates would be stonewalled against incoming freshman classes with higher GPAs, higher aptitude scores, and requiring less money from financial aid because of the spike of incoming students entering from middle-class households.

Degree programs and facilities funded through state and federal means would have to match the expansion, but only in tandem with invested interest from HBCU constituents. After all, a fully exhumed Jim Crow from the catacombs of higher education doesn't mean glowing support for HBCUs, but opportunity for those institutions with the leadership to realize its outcomes. Alumni, black legislators and students must continue the fight for equitable resources, and to champion more consistent financial support from black communities at large.

Affirmative action being picked off by judicial conservatism at the highest levels may seem like a bad idea, but for the schools that exclusively serve the people whom will most be affected by its demise, it may reintroduce HBCU value to the nation and world, in a way more grand than we ever could have imagined without it.